

# **A REPORT AFTER FIVE YEARS:**

## **The Delaware and Raritan Canal Commission**

**September, 1980**





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The Delaware and Raritan Canal Commission has been in operation for five years. At the end of each of those years we have prepared and submitted an annual report, filled with glowing accounts of our progress over the previous twelve months. Missing from these reports, however, is a bigger picture; they do not give a clear sense of the character of our office or of what we have actually accomplished in relation to what we were created to do. We are, therefore, taking the opportunity offered by our fifth anniversary to look at that bigger picture, to have an overview of the Commission and its accomplishments.

This five-year report starts with an examination of the directions given to the Commission in its enabling statute. Next is a statement of the philosophy that has served to direct the Commission's actions. The philosophy is vitally important because it prevents us from operating higgledy-piggledy, approaching each problem anew, without consistency or foresight. The Canal Commission evolved its philosophy early in its life, and that philosophy has been the basis for our approach to all the issues that we must face. Finally, this report concludes with a summary of what we have done in the five years since we opened our office.

### THE COMMISSION

The Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park Law of 1974, which gave birth to the Commission, lays out a simple and direct responsibility for the new agency; the Canal Commission was created to work toward the enhancement and protection of New Jersey's historic D & R Canal. To fulfill that simple charge, however, the Commission must involve itself in a range of activities that is unusually broad for a single State agency. We are told to prepare a master plan for the development of a park along the canal's sixty-mile route. This master plan must, according to our statute, bring together a



sensitivity for five different issues: recreational development, the conservation of natural areas, historic preservation, the enhancement of urban areas along the canal's route, and, most important of all, the plan must accommodate the need to protect the canal's structure and the water that the canal delivers to one and a half million New Jersey residents.

Another of the Commission's functions is to serve as a sort of government mediator. We are to review and approve any action by any agency of the state, county, or municipality that has an impact on the Canal Park. This makes the Canal Commission responsible for making sure that the left hand and the right hand know about each other whenever they take actions that could affect the park.

The Canal Commission is also a land-use regulatory agency. In fact, we have quite extraordinary authority to regulate new development in so far as it affects the Canal Park. The Commission is told to determine an area within which new development could have a drainage, aesthetic, or ecological impact on the park and to make sure that the impact is not harmful. The drainage basin for the Canal Park is about four hundred square miles, so this sizeable chunk of central New Jersey has become the area within which we review projects. The really surprising thing about the Commission's review authority is that it is not just advisory; we actually have the authority to require revisions or even to stop projects if they are harmful to the Canal Park.

Finally, the Canal Commission is instructed to work with municipalities that neighbor the Canal Park, lending them expertise where possible so that they might do things that would have a beneficial effect on the park. We are



told to be good neighbors, so that we can encourage others to return the favor to the park.

#### THE COMMISSION'S PHILOSOPHY

To this comprehensive list of duties the Commission has responded with an approach that, if not unique, is at least very rare in governmental agencies. The essence of this approach is that we have tried to form partnerships with everyone whose interests in the Canal Park might lead them toward acting on the park's behalf. We have gone to municipal environmental commissions to work with them in preserving natural areas, to local recreation directors to coordinate their plans with ours, to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts who look for publicly beneficial projects. We have formed partnerships with sewerage authorities so that their construction work can benefit the canal and with road builders to be sure that their new roads accommodate the canal's interests. We have worked with historical societies for the preservation of the canal's historic qualities. We have evolved a procedure for our regulatory program which combines the most effective aspects of local and regional governments. We as the regional agency, have established standards for the protection of a regional resource while the municipalities, who are closer to the scene, can implement those standards within their borders.

This process of building partnerships has several important consequences. Most immediately, it has allowed the Commission to maintain a small, responsive office. We have had a large number of consultants, and we have had temporary employees, but after five years of operation, the Commission is still maintaining a permanent staff of three. The Commission is proud of its small size. The size of the office reflects our determination to demonstrate that government can be efficient and economical, that agencies do not have to grow each year until they are self-serving instead of public-serving.



More important than the size of the office, however, is that the process of building partnerships forces the agency to be publicly accountable. If we have partners all over the area we cannot become inaccessible, operating outside of public scrutiny, and insensitive to public concerns. We have, in fact, earned a reputation throughout the region as an agency that can be reached, and can be counted on to listen to what is said to us.

A third important consequence of our partnership operation is that it emphasizes the reality that the Canal Park is not owned by some outside entity known as "The State", but that it belongs to every citizen who chooses to exercise ownership. This is particularly appropriate for the Canal Park because there have always been many people who have known in their hearts that the canal was really theirs. Every new partner who contributes to the Canal Park increases the number of committed owners of this remarkable piece of New Jersey's heritage.

Let us turn now to see what this philosophy has done for the Canal Park after five years of practice.

#### THE COMMISSION'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Canal Commission, like any governmental office, has produced a lot of paper. We have written reports, drawn maps, and taken inventories -- we have even promulgated documents. But rather than a tiresome list of those papers, let us try to concentrate on accomplishments that have had a direct impact on the Canal Park. Those accomplishments will be looked at under two categories, those directed toward protecting the Canal Park and those directed toward the park's enhancement.



nearly ten million dollars for studies on the very thing that we are already doing. Furthermore, the New Jersey Division of Water Resources has recently prepared preliminary storm management guidelines that are very similar to ours.

The Canal Commission's regulatory program is also innovative in its administration. Our concern is with a large region and we have set standards for that entire region with a breadth of vision that no local agency could have had. Yet we believe that the actual implementation of regulations on development are far more efficiently administered at the local level than they would be from an office in Trenton. We have, therefore, established administrative procedures that encourage county and municipal review agencies to adopt standards that are equivalent to ours, and then to administer them. This has not only streamlined our procedures, but it has helped developers by setting a single standard for municipal, county, and state levels of review. Developers can be confident that by passing review at one level they will pass it at the others.

#### Canal Park Enhancement:

The Canal Commission was instructed to prepare a master plan for the development of the Canal Park. (The development itself is to be carried out by the Division of Parks and Forestry.) The master plan that the Commission adopted in May of 1977 is the first in a series of planning documents that will provide guidance and cohesion to long term development of the park. It brings together an inventory of natural and man-made resources relating to the park, it establishes guidelines for the appropriate development of each of six different environmental types, and it assigns every part of the sixty mile canal to one of those environmental types.



The next step in planning for the park's development is the publication of a design vocabulary. The design vocabulary, which is nearing completion, will further articulate the guidelines established in the master plan. It discusses considerations for development of the park as a site for canoeing, fishing, hiking, picnicing, and other recreational uses. The design vocabulary, together with the master plan, provides the context for long term development of the park.

The Canal Commission has also taken an active role in development of the park. We have tried to take advantage of the partnerships we have forged in order to get various groups from the region involved in the improvement of the park. We have been instrumental in saving and restoring several of the historic structures that are part of the Canal Park. The bridge-tender's house at Port Mercer is being restored by the Lawrence Township Historical Society and it will be used by them for community meetings. Trenton's Hanover Street bridge-tender's house is also being restored and will be re-used as a private home. The Hanover Street house has also become the focus of an effort to restore and clean up the neighborhood around it. In Stockton, a collection of mill buildings that adjoin the canal are being restored by a group of citizens who organized themselves expressly for that purpose. The wheels are now turning to bring two other canal houses -- the East Millstone bridge-tender's house and a bargemen's barracks in Griggstown -- back to their historic beauty. In each of these cases the Commission brought the restorers to the buildings and helped them work out contracts with the state. Those contracts are, in fact, interesting because they do not call for rent payments but give the tenants free rent in exchange for restoration of the buildings.



The Commission has been instrumental in arranging for a CETA crew to forge a towpath over a mile of canal where none had existed for thirty years. We found a Boy Scout troop who installed three canoe docks in the canal bank and we worked with the Scouts to have 2000 boys camp along the canal and clean its banks of debris. We have encouraged neighboring municipalities to develop their parks along the canal. Such parks have been planned or built in Princeton, Griggstown, Lambertville, Trenton and Lawrence.

In order to enhance the historic relationship between the canal and its neighboring communities -- to preserve the canal's context -- we are in the final steps of helping nine communities prepare nominations for the national register as historic districts. In each of these cases, the Commission efforts have strengthened or even been responsible for the start of local historical societies. There are two other communities that adjoin the canal that we are not working with but that have been inspired by our effort and are proceeding on their own. Historic districts, like municipal parks, make ideal neighbors for the Canal Park.

Much remains to be done so that the Canal Park can approach the potential that is promised. The canal itself is becoming increasingly clogged each year with a scum of floating algae. The need for canoe docks, picnic tables, and small parking lots is more severe now because the park is being more heavily used. Many of these things will be done within the next few years, others will take longer. The park, however, is a dynamic entity. It changes as its uses change, as the demands upon it change, and as nature itself changes. We must remain flexible enough to recognize those changes and adapt our improvement efforts to them.





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